

P R E F A C E

“ONLY, MY SECRET’S MINE,
AND I WON’T TELL”

*It is the mother who guarantees the privacy of the home
by maintaining its respectability, as essential a defense against
incursion or curiosity as the encompassing walls
of the home itself.*

—Laura Mulvey, “Melodrama Inside and Outside the Home”¹

Clementina, Viscountess Hawarden (1822–1865), one of the pioneering women of British photography, took sensual photographs of her daughters in the isolation of her London home.² By whisking away all of the furniture and the Victorian bric-a-brac one is accustomed to seeing in the upper-class homes of the period, Hawarden transformed the first floor of her South Kensington residence into a photographic studio: a private space for taking pictures of her daughters in theatrical poses. *She disappears underneath the photographer’s black cloth, which is one with her own dark dress, as if a layer of her voluminous skirt has been pulled up and over her head. Her delicate hands, white and stained with photographic chemicals, protrude as they adjust the knobs that control the accordionlike bellows of her wooden camera. The mother tilts and focuses the image of her daughters that appears upside down on the screen at the back of her large camera box, a cabinet of sorts. The process takes several long minutes.*³

Even the mise-en-scène of Hawarden’s photographic production emphasizes privacy: she saw her daughters’ beautiful faces, but her face remained hidden. Not surprisingly, Hawarden never ventured into self-portraiture. There is only one photograph that is believed to be *possibly*



Figure 1 *Clementina with a star on her head; Florence sits next to the “curvaceous vase.”*

a self-portrait, an image that is just as likely to be a portrait of her look-alike sister, Anne Bontine.

Despite the brevity of Hawarden’s photographic years, 1857–1864, she managed to produce over eight hundred photographs (while giving birth to the last three of her eight children).⁴ Hawarden’s oeuvre focuses almost entirely on her lovely adolescent daughters (Isabella Grace, Clementina, Florence Elizabeth), her collection of pretty objects (an Indian traveling cabinet, a cheval glass, a Gothic-style desk, a small wooden chair with a padded floral-patterned seat, a shell-covered box, a silver goblet, a tambourine, a concertina, a curvaceous vase), and closets of fancy dress (the breeches and tights of a page, the elaborate dress and headdress of Mary, Queen of Scots, the black lace of a Spanish dancer, the skirt and broom of Cinderella, a riding habit, the Orientalized dress



Figure 2 *Florence as Mary, Queen of Scots, and Clementina as her kneeling page.*

of a concubine; see figs. 1 and 2). Like many Victorian mothers of her class, Hawarden collected photographs of her growing girls and either she or another family member or servant or friend pasted them into albums. But unlike the standard images found in Victorian family albums, these photographs overflow with folds of sexuality and an invitation to touch: a daughter pulling up her dress and underskirts to reveal an ankle criss-crossed with ribbons; a daughter in her corset and petticoat before a mirror; two daughters in pounds of petticoats and silk, one nestling her head on the breast of the other; a sister dramatically, yet subtly, pulling on a tender lock of her sister's hair (plate 1).

Even the edges of the photographs give way to touching. After being torn from the family albums (for reasons still unclear), they were donated to London's Victoria and Albert Museum by Hawarden's granddaughter, another Clementina (Clementina Tottenham), who had inher-

ited 775 photographs from her mother. The pictures arrived in 1939. No longer in the heart of the home (the family album), but in the Museum's humidity-controlled, acid-free environment, their scarred borders, their ripped and cut edges, remain poignant signs, permanent scars, of their short but dramatic flight from Hawarden's home (5 Princes Gardens, South Kensington) to one of England's premiere cultural institutions (right around the corner). Their palpable edges, always overlooked (even misleadingly "repaired" in the only published book of Hawarden's pictures), mark a transformation from the often dismissed maternal collection to the official paternal space of the museum.⁵ Hawarden's pictures raise significant issues of gender, motherhood, and sexuality as they relate to photography's inherent attachments to loss, duplication and reduplication, illusion, fetish. Hawarden's photographs demand analysis from psychoanalytic, feminist, and cultural-historical points of view. Yet, little has been published on Hawarden and only a limited number of her images have been reproduced.

Hawarden, like the other "great" Victorian woman (and also amateur) photographer Julia Margaret Cameron (1815–1879), never overtly compromised her maternal image as the devoted mother. Whereas Cameron did not begin photography until her children were grown (when she was forty-eight), Hawarden began taking pictures during her twilight years of childbirth (at age thirty-seven). Hawarden avoided the potential conflict between her roles as mother and artist by remaining focused on her children. (As Susan Sontag has written in regard to our current Kodak culture, "Not to take pictures of one's children, particularly when they are small, is a sign of parental indifference."⁶) Hawarden exhibited her work only twice, in 1863 and in 1864, both times as an amateur at the Photographic Society of London. In short, Hawarden was appreciated for her photographic work but never well-known. She may have intended more for her photography, but her premature death in 1865 at age forty-two, along with the difficulties faced by any artist of her gender, cut short any such possibilities.

Hawarden and her work will always remain young, a brief moment marked by death, absence of information, mature life, images of self, di-

aries. Lewis Carroll, a man who left an excess of information (letters, diaries, books, photographs) *and* secrets all his own records meeting Hawarden only once (diary entry for 24 June 1864).⁷ Yet, Carroll would see Hawarden from a distance a short month later (diary entry for 22 July 1864). Writing of this missed meeting, Carroll unknowingly, yet poignantly, foreshadows the evanescence that now characterizes Hawarden: “went to call on Lord Hawarden to get the prints I bought—& was just in time to see Lady Hawarden get into her carriage and drive off.”⁸ Taking many secrets with her—such as how her oeuvre would or would not develop, what she would or would not photograph after her children were grown and gone from home, the significance of her focus on women and the relationships between them—Hawarden would die just six months after Carroll’s fleeting glance of her being carried off by her carriage. Leaving so much (how many other families have been so excessively documented?) and so little behind, Hawarden and her work perpetuate a state of “just missed.”

Nowhere is Hawarden more fixed as “just missed” than in the magical, yet mournful, photograph that makes a spectacle out of her leggy “humanoid” camera reflected in the mirror (fig. 3).⁹ As Virginia Dodier has observed, “except for the faint suggestion of a disembodied hand in the act of removing and replacing the lens cap, there is no sign of Lady Hawarden in the mirror.”¹⁰ Hawarden’s daughter Clementina, sensual for the pose of her right hand that reaches up to her head like an odalisque, girlish for her severely parted hair and plain dress, presents the image of her mother missed by the mirror yet captured as camera-tripod–fleeting hand (fig. 4). Left with only this ghostly image of Hawarden, I long for the body lost to the camera, lost in the mirror. In turn, I fetishize her camera—caught by her nearly lost, almost impossible to see disembodied hand.

Hawarden’s photograph hails Nadar’s famous photograph (taken with his brother Adrien Tournachon), *Pierrot the Photographer* (1854–55; fig. 5). At the center of both photographs is a picture of a camera looking/reflecting back at the photographer himself/herself. In the image by Nadar, the mime (who is by definition a mimic, silent like a photo-



Figure 3 “Her leggy ‘humanoid’ camera reflected in the mirror.”

graph) is dressed in Pierrrot’s characteristic white costume, which here brilliantly reflects shadows, like a mirror (like Hawarden’s cheval glass), like a photograph, like light-sensitive paper giving way to image.¹¹ In Hawarden’s photograph, “Clementina” can be understood as both mother and daughter, just as in Nadar’s photograph “the magician” can be understood as both Nadar and Pierrrot.¹² (Both the photographer and the mime are tricksters of illusion.) In these pictures, both Hawarden and Nadar are complex absent and present doubles of their respective humanoid cameras: they are linked to their cameras as if the shutter cord were umbilicus.¹³

Hawarden’s body, umbilically linked to her daughters as the photograph is to its referent, is emphatically maternal and homosocial in its reduplication. To begin with, what is most apparent in the few written documents that have survived is Hawarden’s success as a mother, an

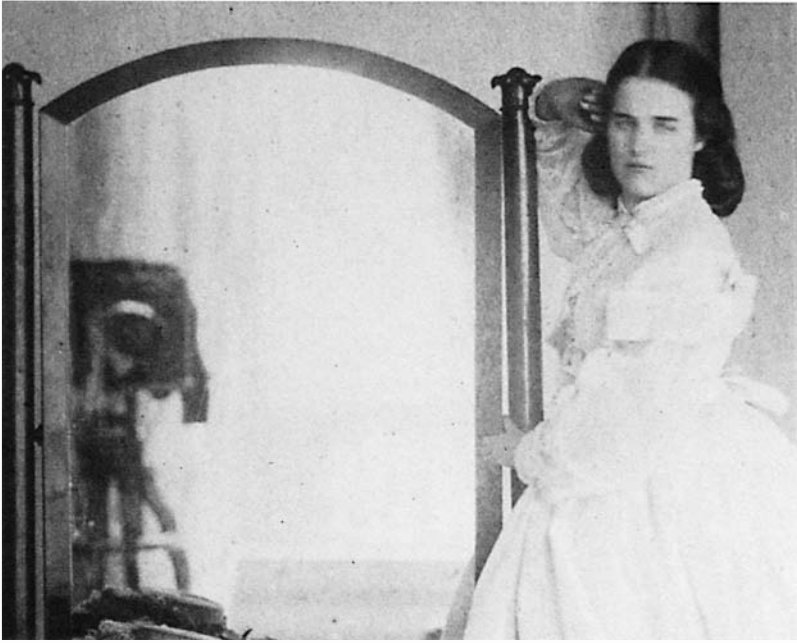


Figure 4 *“The body lost to the camera, lost in the mirror.”*



Figure 5 *Nadar and Adrien Tournachon. Pierrot the Photographer, 1854–55.*

image of maternal goodness and excessive giving that seemingly never faltered. For example, her sister exclaimed that she was “a great baby lover.”¹⁴ Likewise, her uncle Mountstuart Elphinstone wrote that he “never saw nicer children or better brought up. It seems strange in Clemy who could never keep her own shawl in order & whose devotion to her children seemed enough to spoil a whole generation, but her good sense and regard to duty has kept all right.”¹⁵ Furthermore, the pictures themselves strongly suggest that photography was an activity to be shared with her daughters. In one photograph, a daughter appears to be wearing a darkroom apron; others (through the gestures and expressions of the daughters) suggest a playful reciprocity between photographer and model. One might say that Hawarden documented a female world of love between mother and daughter and between daughters as sisters. But how are we to understand this love? What are we to do with the same-sex tenderness, longing, cross-dressing, caressing, sexuality, flirtation, longing, voyeurism, and unveiling depicted?

Specifically, why is eroticism, let alone the homoeroticism, of Hawarden’s pictures emphatically overlooked in the writings on Hawarden? Why does eroticism remain a secret (in the limited essays, books, and museum catalogues on Hawarden) when it is so visible? *Becoming: The Photographs of Clementina, Viscountess Hawarden* responds to this question, chipping away at those “cultural guardians” that have maintained the invisibility (the interiority) of Hawarden’s pictured erotics: her class, her gender, her image as a productive mother, the isolation of her studio and her photographs, our conception of Victorianism as it marks historical difference and distance.

It is as if Hawarden’s pictures, despite their erotic visibility, have remained in the closet of her suprainteriorized world. And, given the fact that she must have used a converted closet as a darkroom, Hawarden’s closet is doubly resonant: it is the secret chamber, both metaphorically and architecturally, where her pictures were developed. Inside this closet, Hawarden imagined and developed her interiorized secret: pictures of same-sex erotic desire, an inner secret that may have been a secret to herself as well. Yet, the point is not to “uncloset” Hawarden, for Hawarden was not a homosexual woman. Hawarden’s closet is simply, as

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick might argue, “the closet of imagining a homosexual secret.”¹⁶

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I tell my secret? No indeed, not I:

Perhaps some day, who knows?

But not today; it froze, and blows, and snows,

And you're too curious: fie!

You want to hear it? well:

Only, my secret's mine, and I won't tell.

—Christina Rossetti, “Winter: My Secret,” 1862¹⁷

XXIII

Preface

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